

BELFAST SEPARATION FENCES DIVIDE, BUT SLOW VIOLENCE

By Sharon Sadeh Ha'aretz Thursday, September 04, 2003

BELFAST, Ireland - A group of children and a bricklayer are standing at the bottom of Glenbryn Park, a street in Northern Belfast. Some adults gathered near them throw suspicious glances in all directions. Everywhere you look, there is neglect. Abandoned houses lacking walls and windows line the streets. Some are total lost causes - in these cases, the only thing left of a house is its skeletal frame. In the past, these dilapidated structures were home to Protestant families. But the families fled the area in the 60s and 70s, when Northern Ireland's violent dispute reached its bloodiest peak. At the time, terror strikes, assassinations and house burnings were routine.

The children, on summer vacation, energetically knock down walls and pull bricks out of them, producing a new item, in a modified mortar and pestle process known in local slang as "Belfast Bricks." Materials from the torn-down houses are modified and sold for a few pounds to enterprising contractors. These builders turn up suddenly in pickup trucks, and vanish as fast as they come. Suddenly, the kids stop working. One of them points at this Haaretz writer, after having seen a camera flash. "Don't go over there," says the worried taxi driver, Jerry Holden, who accompanied me on my visit to the city. "They might attack you - they don't like journalists." The cab driver, a Catholic who prefers to ignore local politics, begs me to get back in the cab. I do so, and we drive away. This scene transpired in Belfast's Ardoyne area, a notorious battlefield in which Protestants and Catholics who live side by side fight out their grievances. Ardoyne Street typifies the dispute. On the southern end of the street, which is home to Catholics who support the expulsion of British authorities, flags of Ireland proudly fly. On the other side of the street there is a row of Protestant houses, some of them decorated by flags of the Protestant Orangemen, who are loyal to the British. Two years ago, this tense, emotion-fraught area captured worldwide attention when parents from a local Catholic school, Holy Cross, needed army and police protection as they walked with their children along Ardoyne Street. Since then, tempers have calmed, yet hatred lingers. Members of both sides, Catholic and Protestant, found one common enemy - the media. To say that journalists are not welcome here would be an understatement. Signs of Protestant-Catholic enmity are to be found everywhere. Iron bars line the fronts of houses, to protect them from Molotov cocktails and other projectiles. Some local residents have sealed up windows on the front of their homes. Violence can be sparked by the slightest pretext. "A rumor about how some youth took a few punches from someone on the other side is enough," Holden says. "He brings his friends, and they bring their friends, and that's enough to set the whole area alight." This volatile situation forced the British government to erect a separation fence between Catholic and Protestant houses in the area. The origins of such walls, which block off areas of violent friction in Belfast, are to be found in the 1970s during the period known as "The Troubles." Since then, the fences have become a poignant symbol of Belfast, past and present. Good fences make good neighbors Belfast Lord Mayor, Councillor Martin Morgan, from the moderate, pro-peace Catholic SDLP party, explains that the fences were originally intended as temporary stopgap measures. "Like many other things," he says, they became permanent fixtures. "All the walls we built were there for a short period of time," he says, but "some of them are [now] 30 years old, and there

is no sign that they will ever come down." Morgan, 36, a social worker by training, was born and raised in Belfast, and knows the city's strife-torn sections like the back of his hand. The separation fences, some of which tower 12 meters in height, carry the Orwellian name "Peace Line." The British decided that they are a worthy security item. As years passed by, most of the walls were raised at such heights to ensure that young people can't use them as platforms to throw Molotov cocktails. Put together out of bricks and other materials, the walls have multiplied over the years - until the early 1990s, there were 18 separation fences in Belfast, while today there are 40. On average, each fence is some 500 meters in length. Security authorities give orders to close the fences' gates at night to ensure people don't cross from one side to the other; in emergencies, the gates can be opened to allow ambulances and other vehicles to pass through. "The language I always use," regarding the walls, is "regrettable, but understandable and necessary," says Morgan. The mayor is quick to admit that the walls are far from a perfect solution. "First, they [the walls] don't guarantee peace, because ... a terrorist can get into a car and drive through the walls, and they do so. And how high do you build the wall, to block things from being thrown over?" Despite these shortcomings, the Belfast mayor believes the walls have made a significant contribution toward keeping peace. In Morgan's view, the separation walls serve a dual purpose: they impede terrorists' movements and thus stave off attacks, and they also reduce the city's manpower load. "Instead of sending dozens of policemen and army personnel," Morgan explains, "we close the gates and have two policemen patrol the area." He adds: "The structure itself is maybe 400-500 meters. It costs 200,000 pounds, paid by the British government, and has a gate in the middle, and it requires only two police officers to open the gate. It is locked at night, and if there's an incident during the day the police come and lock it. They send two police officers, so right away they save dozens of police officers from attending, and so these dozens of police officers can be redirected to do other assignments. In terms of human resources, the fences save a lot of money and resources." As Morgan sees it, comparisons can't be drawn between Belfast's walls and the separation fence which Israel is erecting in the West Bank. "I've seen pictures of the wall which Israel is building," he says, "but it's not the same situation in Northern Ireland and Belfast. Most of the walls [here] literally separate houses; the wall goes into the back garden of each community - so, quite literally, it divides Protestants and Catholics." Hatred runs so deep on his city's streets, the Belfast mayor adds, that there have been cases of drunks who were beaten almost to death after having taken a wrong turn on the wrong street. "The sad fact of life is that we still need fences in Belfast because sectarianism has always been rife," the mayor concludes. "This wall doesn't bother us at all. We've gotten used to it," says Annie Patten, a devout Protestant who has the word "shalom" written in Hebrew above her front door. Annie and her husband Jimmy are both retired, and two years ago they moved to Kirk Street in Northern Belfast, after being forced out of their home at Lower Shankill Estate, an area known as a stronghold for the extremist Protestant organization, the UDA (Ulster Defense Association). The couple visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem three years ago ("when it was still safe to visit your country"), and since then they have a soft spot for Israel. Inside their house they have framed quotations from the prophets, and the New Testament. A 10-foot-high separation fence runs through their backyard, blocking any view of happenings on the parallel Catholic street. The couple's neighbor, Sam Spence, a former taxi driver

who lost a leg a few months ago due to a disease, also displays a positive, while at the same time pessimistic, attitude toward the fence. "There will never be peace with the Catholics," he says. "So at least this wall helps." Enclaves of poverty Spence, 39, views the wall as though it is a fact of nature, or perhaps a writ sent down by God. "This wall was standing here when I moved in to live here four years ago," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, this is like the Berlin Wall: I don't see or hear the other side, and I certainly don't cross on to their street." As he sees it, the higher the fence, the better. And the wall, he predicts, is probably there to stay. Mulling over this prediction, Spence has second thoughts. Though, he says, the wall will probably still be around when he dies, he hopes to live to see it toppled by a new era of reconciliation. "In the end, we'll need to live together, as one people," says the retired cab driver. This sentiment, he explains, is harbored by 90 percent of Belfast's residents, though few will admit to sharing this hope of rapprochement. The "Good Friday" peace accord, signed in April 1998, did not address the separation walls. But the agreement helped lower violence levels in Belfast, and Northern Ireland as a whole. During 30 years of fighting, 3,352 people were killed, 302 of which were security personnel. The bloodshed reached its pinnacle in 1972, when 470 people were killed. In 1998, the year the agreement was signed, 55 people were killed; in 2002 there were only six fatalities. So far, seven people have been killed in 2003. As violence has abated, the quality of life has risen. Official statistics hold that current annual growth rates in Northern Ireland are 2 percent. Unemployment has fallen from 8 percent in 1998 to less than 6 percent today. Particularly noticeable areas of growth are recreation and tourism; in these areas, the situation in central Belfast has improved markedly. Five years ago, you couldn't get a cup of espresso in town. Today, Belfast has flourishing hotels, restaurants and coffee houses, and offers organized tours to the separation fences to tourists flocking to the area. Morgan accounts for his city's revival: "There were times in Belfast city center, just opposite the main city hall, in the main shopping area, when you were stopped and physically searched before you entered; and, literally, there was gridlock. Body-searches were conducted - people even had to show what they had in their pockets - to make sure people were not carrying bombs. No cars were allowed to the city center, and buses were searched. Bus searches were routinely done: a security officer would board the bus, and walked up and down the aisle, to see whether there was anything suspicious about it. "Now we've moved away from all that. If you go to the city center there is no evidence of what was then." But these fruits of peace are felt mainly within Belfast's middle and upper classes. The city is still pockmarked by enclaves of poverty. In areas such as Lower Shankill Estate, and also Springfield Road, unemployment rates are as high as 40 percent. Walled off, Catholic from Protestant, areas such as the Ardoyne area have unbearably high unemployment rates. In such locales, a shocking 88 percent of Catholic children live below the poverty line. The figure for Protestant children is an almost-as-dismal 77 percent. Despite the peace agreement and efforts in reconciliation and mutual improvement, blatant disparities between the populations linger. Twice as many Catholics, for instance, belong are unemployed. The poverty shows that no matter how many fences are put up, there is still much work to be done to overcome the devastation of years of conflict.